



# Challenges of Teaching English as a Second Language in India and the Role of Literature: Problems and Perspectives

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## Abstract

*Understanding language through literature is a very complex phenomenon in the Indian context with such intricate diversification of languages. The executive use of these diverse languages make it more engrossing to learn and classify the same into multiple morphological, phonological and syntactical levels. Language learning is difficult at the lower level of educational chain because it compromises the process of learning through the extensive use of the first language rather than using English language; and in such a scenario, the theories developed by ELT serve the purpose of helping learners understand the basic concepts. In addition to the understanding of language, ELT also helps to improve and understand the theory in an expanded way and contributes to the lower level with an improved learning and understanding base. However, the goals and target of ELT are not very clearly defined in the teaching- learning arena as the needs, objectives and pre- requisite skills of the learners to understand meaning is often ignored. Although learning from a literary perspective has a wide-ranging role in English studies, but it still needs deeper exploration in all relevant dimensions and more research-oriented teaching strategies need to be employed. So, this paper makes an attempt to explore and suggest solutions to the problems that the students face, being non- native speakers of English in India. It also tries to probe into newer prospects of incorporating language in literature, the controversy between teaching and learning and the functions of language within a literary text.*

The ability to connect with others may be termed as one of the greatest gifts nature has attributed to the humans, and language is the most vital skill that provides us the opportunity to do so in a more meaningful manner. Having multiple and good language skills give individuals an upper hand on their monolingual peers. English is one such language. Braj Kachru in his "Model of World English" has divided the spread and development of the English language into three spheres namely, the inner, the outer and the expanding circle. The inner circle embraces places where the British travelled and made English their first language like America, New Zealand, Australia, etc. at

The outer circle included other nations and colonies set up by the British people where it become the language that acted as a bridge between the English and the natives such as in India and parts of Asia and Africa. Lastly, the expanding circle emerged as a phase of globalization with countries like Japan, Russia, China, Korea, etc. started teaching and learning the language. Also with the expansion of the world market what started as an era of linguistic imperialism has now changed into an age of linguistic globalization. For a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country like India, English has now become a linking language and a universal negotiator. Over the

years, it has developed its status from the language of the colonizers to the language of the masses and of choice for the country's economic development and social mobility. Teaching and learning of this elite language has now become an absolute necessity. According to a report by Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm and the National Research Council, 2009: learning is the gathering of experience across a variety of orthodox and casual settings with inimitable strengths complementing each other. Although English language is taught throughout India for various resolves but the aims and purposes remain frequently undefined and consequently the practices and methodologies to improve also persist vaguely. In India, English language learning is still based on teaching skills that consists only of lectures on the development of the English language from various other sources; how words are formed; and the degeneration and regeneration of meaning. The focus has always been more on literature than on linguistics.

The British Council library states that English language enjoys official or special status in not less than seventy five countries with a total population of over two billion. English has become a necessity today, especially in the context of India's journey towards being a democratic society. English in India is at crossroads. There are innumerable reasons for this dismal status of ELT in the country extending from untrained teachers, inadequate teaching materials, dearth of proper teaching methodologies and the defective system of grading and examinations where rote learning fetches marks rather than the knowledge base of the learners.

Although India has placed English as an official/second language, the acquisition process of language cannot be deemed as a simple one as the country enjoys a huge diversity of culture and languages. The majority of Indian students have always considered English as an elite language, but often feel a sense of uneasiness the moment they hear something in English. As a result, the teachers of English face innumerable difficulties in teaching the language. Even though the status of ELT has improved in the recent years, it is still largely in need of certain statutory decisions that need to be inculcated in the Indian education system. Appropriate and adequate remedial measures need to be taken for the successful rectification of the mistakes that govern the English language teaching in India.

Mixed ability groups are an integral part of the Indian subcontinent. Learners come from various stratas of the society with different economic and cultural values. In the rural pockets of India, language teaching is done using the vernacular language. On the contrary, the medium of

higher education and of competitive examinations has always been in English. Lack of adequate number of teachers who are well trained to teach English is another major hindrance in the development of the language learning process. The students to teacher ratio is high and ineffective. The large size of the classrooms makes it very challenging for the teachers to provide individual attention to all the students. In many rural and semi-urban localities, English is not even the second language. The language pattern keeps fluctuating with the change in the topography of the country. The northern region is directed by Hindi language in its many dialects, followed by English. In the southern side, the regional language comes first and Hindi and English both keep switching places. The eastern and the western parts of the country also have their own languages and dialects. The presence of so many languages and dialects add more to the existing problems as it becomes too difficult for the English teachers to stabilize the mother tongue influence of the learners.

Along with the regional disparity and vast diversity the Indian educational system is at equal fault for the adverse and delirious condition of the English teaching in the country. The absence of a unified syllabus has worsened the situation to a large extent. The ever changing policies has disturbed the ongoing teaching learning process. ELT is delicate as it includes all: the children, the adolescents, and the adults but the lack of coordination between the primary and secondary levels of education make things difficult to process. Moreover, the system leaves hardly any scope for the proper screening of learners to focus on their individual needs and no categorisation is done keeping the factors of age, aptitude and motivation in view. A number of other relevant problems have also emerged in the process of English language learning i.e., the comprehensive assessment of students who are actually interested in learning English as a language has never been done, there have been lesser or very few seminars or workshops organized for the assessment and selection of properly trained and qualified ELT experts. Adding to these problems, the most important challenge faced by the English language teachers in India is that of a proper teaching methodology that needs to be applied during the language learning process. Indian schools and colleges lack well-equipped language laboratories with access to latest ELT techniques and world class materials; the establishment, management and most prominently the usage of these technologies for language learning is vital. The use of different teaching approaches such as the direct method where learners only use the target language that they are trying to learn, the grammar translation method to make students familiar with the English grammar and its usage; and the audio-lingual method which is similar to the

direct method and is based on behaviouristic theory where the learners receive feedbacks on the basis of their use of the English. Also, a structural approach should be brought in while making students learn the complex grammar rules. They should learn in a specific order. The focus of the experts should be on teaching communicative and community based language. Teachers should also incorporate a task-based and project-based language learning approach in their teaching methods where relevant and interesting tasks should be set up for the students who are supposed to use their pre-existing knowledge of the English language for the completion of those tasks. The lexical approach is another way to make the students aware of the most commonly used English words and help in the acquisition of vocabulary. According to R. B Dusbange, "There are four aspects which are involved in the study of the language. They are: the Semantic aspect, the Phonetic aspect, the Graphic aspect and the Phonetic-cum-Graphic aspect. The semantic aspect refers to the understanding of meaning. The phonetic aspect deals with the spelling and pronunciation. The graphic aspect refers to the reading aspect of the language. In the study of a language all these aspects function in co-ordination with each other. With reference to these aspects we can draw the following aims: (1) To teach pupils to understand spoken and written language; (2) To teach them to acquire language skills; (3) To teach them to speak the language; and (4) To teach them to write." (Dusbange, 1999, p. 195) Most importantly, the nurturing of a socio-cultural and philological consciousness is crucial for an active language teaching and learning practise with the direct involvement of the parents, teachers and students.

There has always been an ongoing debate on which one is better- language or literature. The study of literature is based on literary criticism and language teaching is done through linguistic understandings. However, in reality, both these disciplines of English studies are complementary to each other. Other than improving language structure and vocabulary, literature has a significant role in language teaching as it aids the LSRW skills, makes possible the understanding and analysis of experiences and real-life events, helps in realizing individual and societal goals and also removes the interferences caused by mother-tongue influence. J. P Boyle in his *Testing Language with Students of Literature in ESL Situations* quotes that "Commonwealth countries, where the students who choose to do a degree in English must study a great deal of literature. However, their language ability is often not too good, particularly in countries where English is being spoken less and less and the mother tongue is taking over. There is a tendency in such circumstances to play down the relevance of literature

teaching." (Boyle, 1986, p. 199) Hence, the study of language only on the basis of literary texts become questionable. The relevance of themes that are included in literary books such as war, romance, death, etc. may not be dealt with much importance for students of all disciplines as the need of every student varies. students of technology or those studying commerce or medicine or others may view English to serve as a purpose specific language. Given that, even though the language of literature seems innovative but it cannot fulfil the purpose of learning. Zeenat B. Merchant in her *Objectives of Teaching and Learning English in India: A Perspective* has also mentioned that, "the Ministry of Education, Government of India has emphasized the study of English for practical purposes, saying that the average Indian student today needs English for specific purposes, that is, to be able to follow a lecture given in English and to express his ideas in English." (Zeenat, 1999, p. 126)

Despite the language- literature controversy doubting the inclusion of literature in language teaching, it cannot be ruled out that literary texts draw out the rawness from language and provide it with innovative and excellent execution. Syed Asim Ali in his paper entitled *The Nature of Literary Language*, published in the 20<sup>th</sup> volume of Aligarh Journal of English Studies (1999) quotes: "the language of literature is not a variety of language as 'legal language' or 'medical language'. The former is all-inclusive, whereas the latter consists of only relevant vocabulary to the exclusion of the rest...So literary language is not essentially different from original discourses; as a variety or as a special type of language." (Ali, 1999, p. 94) According to the words of W. R Lee: "The substance of the English language ... has been shaped by literature. It is in literature that resources of the language are most skillfully used." (Marckwardt, 1978, p. 07)

Albert Marckwardt (1978) further quotes Lee: "Lyrics are to be heard and not merely seen, plays are to be seen and heard. Literature is rooted, so far as the foreign language learner is concerned in the oral basis of language learning: rooted in lively and meaningful oral drills, in spoken and acted dialogues, in simple dramatization of stories; indeed, in those very procedures which make for successful and interested learning of the language." (Marckwardt, 1978, p. 06) Along with its touch of aesthesis, literary studies aim at providing a multi- sensory learning experience by looking at the needs of learners and focusing on their specific knowledge base. The representational nature of literature makes learners involve their emotions, imagination and empathy in the expression of their ideas and aids creativity. It also makes learners aware of other cultures and develop a sense of tolerance and

understanding. But what can be really seen as a challenge to this usage of literary language is whether the prescribed pieces of prose, poetry or drama actually cater to the necessities of the language learners or not. A number of other challenges relevant to syllabus formation have been identified by experts that may include appropriate text selection, what should be the proper length of then texts agreed, whether the selected texts are culturally and socially acceptable, etc., Various strategies can also be employed by teachers for upgrading the language game in literature classes by reducing classroom disturbances, focusing more on the stylistic peculiarity of the language used in literary texts, emphasizing more on readability techniques and translation based studies. Critical appreciation along with the philosophical and aesthetic aspect of language will further provide a creative framework for the learners and stimulate them to alter and outspread a text.

*Literature*, a book by Duff and Maley asserts that many of the problems can be answered if the teaching experts retrospect by asking a series of questions about the suitability of the literary texts suggested for different group of learners like whether the learners are actually interested in the subject matter; whether the level of language is appropriate; whether it is culturally acceptable and whether it can be utilized for language learning purposes.

### CONCLUSION

To sum up, it can be said that English language in India got introduced by the British in the hope of aiding colonization. English might have backed up the voice of the colonizers then but the present scenario highlights this elite language as an integral part of our communication system. English maybe the second or the third language in the Indian subcontinent but practically it can be seen leading everywhere. The focus a shifted into an English based curriculum as more and more English medium schools and colleges have been sprouting up. Parents are now sending their children to English medium schools to make them familiar with the language in the primary level itself. The secondary levels also have started to impart education in English language rather than the previously used native languages. Major reasons behind this shift can be because of the development of industrialisation in India, advent of foreign universities and the overall globalisation. The status of English language has been enhancing day by day, yet there are areas that need immediate attention and care. Language studies and the development of LSRW skills can be seen improving in the recent years. The newly introduced National Educational policy by the Government of India has made some drastic changes in the Indian

educational arena based on the evaluation of the various statistics. Talking about the role of literature, it can be used as effectively for language learning as it itself is comprised of language only. Even if literature has always enjoyed an unparalleled status as a discipline of the subject of English keeping in view the philosophical nature of the studies, it cannot be ruled out that new methodologies and teaching practices has also cropped up to assimilate language learning through prose, poetry and dramas. It can be rightly said that it is more desirable to understand the needs of the learners. English is not the medium of instruction for a majority of students. It is more like a tool for acquiring information and developing the knowledge base. Thus, the problems relating to teaching and learning English language need urgent solutions so that the students should be able to read and write efficiently in English.

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